

Alternatives to the garbage pail

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You may not think twice about throwing away your half-eaten sandwich or hot dog, but this little bit of wasted food adds up. According to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, industrialized countries waste 222 million tons of food annually. In the United States alone, 34 million tons of food goes to waste each year. According to Jonathan Bloom, author of "American Wasteland," each day Americans throw away enough food to fill the 90,000-seat Rose Bowl. That's more food waste than can fit in the entire Cleveland Browns Stadium — each day!

Every day we throw away food that is perfectly edible. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, food waste represents the single largest component of municipal solid waste going into landfills and incinerators. When food waste rots away in landfills, it turns into methane, a potent greenhouse gas with more than 21 times the global warming potential of carbon dioxide. Fortunately, local initiatives are helping Cleveland reduce the amount of food waste landing in landfills.

In November 2009, for example, the Cuyahoga County Solid Waste District and Entrepreneurs for Sustainability launched a three-week composting pilot program. The program involved eight downtown Cleveland businesses, such as The Q, Tower City and Great Lakes Brewing Co. Over the three-week period, 9 tons of food waste were collected and delivered to composting facilities.

One local composting facility is Rosby Resource Recycling. Located in Brooklyn Heights, the company focuses on the recycling of organic materials into soil, mulch, compost and leaf humus. According to Rosby Resource Recycling, "we reclaim tons of material from the waste stream each day that otherwise would have been buried in the earth, and we find ways to reintroduce valuable resources back into local markets."

Another local food waste initiative is the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition's Food Waste Recovery Working Group. The purpose of this group is "to develop efficient food waste recovery systems and infrastructure for the recycling and reuse of compostable materials from businesses, residents and agencies." The Food Waste Recovery Working Group has already helped bring composting to Cleveland's West Side Market.

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A technician at Sansai Environmental Technologies in Cleveland spreads out a bucket of treated carrots on a soil bed that contains earthworms. The business collects fruit and vegetable scraps from the Cleveland Clinic, coffee shops, breweries and restaurants.

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After a food waste audit, initiated by this group, found that 500 to 700 pounds of compostable food waste is generated each day the market is open, the city of Cleveland was prompted to apply for a grant to purchase two in-vessel composting units

for the market.

In addition to composting, another way to cut back on wasted food is to donate excess food to a food bank or other food collection organization. The Cleveland Foodbank collects surplus food and donated food items from retailers and food manufacturers and distributes the food to local hunger centers.

This not only keeps food from going to waste, but provides relief to hungry people in the community.

Making use of what we already produce will be key if we are to adequately

feed a global population that is approaching 7 billion. According to Tristram Stuart, food waste expert and a contributing author to Worldwatch Institute's "State of the World 2011: Innovations that Nourish the Planet" report, the nearly 40 million tons of food wasted by U.S. households, retailers and food services each year is enough to satisfy the hunger of the approximately 1 billion malnourished people in the world.

The report highlights agricultural innovations — including reductions in post-harvest losses — in sub-Saharan

Africa that are helping alleviate hunger and poverty.

With the help of local composting initiatives, Cleveland is already starting to make progress in reducing its food waste. We need more of these types of initiatives here in Ohio and around the world if we are to significantly decrease the millions of tons of food wasted each year.

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